

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 7084
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
USINT BAGHDAD
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
SECDEF WASHDC
DIA WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 1248

E.O. 11652: XGDS-1
TAGS: 0304, SY, LE
SUBJ: SYRIAN CASUALTIES IN LEBANON

REF: IR 6 857 0059 78

1. FURTHER TO EXCELLENT REPORT ON RECENT SYRIAN DEATHS IN LEBANON CONTAINED IN REFTEL, WE UNDERSTAND FROM LOCAL PRELATE THAT "A SENIOR INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL" PUT THE NUMBER OF SYRIAN DEATHS IN LEBANON AT 170 IN THE RECENT FIGHTING ALTHOUGH DISINFORMATION BEING CIRCULATED THAT LESS THAN 60 SYRIAN SOLDIERS DIED. ALSO HEARD FROM A SEPARATE SOURCE WHO FREQUENTLY MEETS WITH INTELLIGENCE OFFICIALS THAT THREE FULL COLONELS WERE AMONG THOSE SLAIN. EMBASSY HAS BEEN ABLE TO VERIFY THAT AT LEAST ONE CHRISTIAN COLONEL FROM WADI NASERA REGION OF SYRIA (NORTH
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OF LEBANESE BORDER) DIED IN FIGHTING.

2. MANY SYRIANS BELIEVE THAT GOVERNMENT BROUGHT CASUALTIES BACK FROM LEBANON IN STAGES AND ENCOURAGED FAMILIES TO HAVE QUICK AND QUIET FUNERALS. PRELATE, HOWEVER, TOLD US THAT SUCH MEASURES NOT NECESSARY BECAUSE MOST OF THOSE SLAIN WERE FROM VILLAGES AND EVEN SOLDIERS

WHO COME FROM URBAN AREAS ARE OFTEN BURIED IN ANCESTRAL VILLAGES. HE CONCEDED, NONETHELESS THAT SARG DISCOURAGED LARGE FQLBFR#PROCESSIONS. GOVERNMENT AIDED IN THIS BY BURIAL PRACTICE OF ALL RELIGIONS SECTS (CHRISTIAN IES WELL AS MUSLIM) TO BURY DEAD WITHIN 24 HOURS.

3. COMMENT: PRKWATE#CLAIMED THAT SYRIANS WERE MORE AFRAID OF GROUNDY#

ANGER AGAINST THE LEBANESE AND SUBSEQUENT PRESSURE FOR HZAFWINE#SYRIAN POLICY IN FTNM THAN AT UNREST DIRECTED AGAINST ASSAD REGIME. THIS MAY BE TRUE IN THE SHORT RUN, AND INDEED WE HAVE HEARD COMMENTS FROM SEVERAL SYRIANS THAT SYRIAN ARMY BELIEVES THNAME#OFF SECOND BEST IN LAST ENCOUNTER AND HAS SOME SCORES TO SETTLE. OVER THE LONGER TERM, HOWEVER, THE POSSIBILITY OF INCREASED SYRIAN CASUALTIES INNOEBANON IS A MAJOR CONCERN TO ASSAD. AT PRESENT, BOTH THE ARMY AND THE BAATH PARTY SUPPORT THE SYRIAN ROLE IN LEBANON. THE PUBLIC ACCEPTS IT AND THE GOVERNMENT HAS LEARNED THROUGH EXPERIENCE THAT IT IS A FINANCIAL BURDEN SYRIAN CAN BEAR, ALBEIT NOT WITHOUT SACRIFICE. AN ESCALATION OF SYRIAN CASUALTIES, HOWEVER, COULD UPSET THIS CONSENSUS AND GIVE RISE TO RENEWED QUESTIONING OF ASSAD'S LEBANON POLICY IN ARMY AND PARTY RANKS. IN ADDITION, A FLOW OF SYRIAN COFFINS TO

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TRADITIONAL SUNNI CENTES SUCH AS HAMA OR HOMS COULD EASILY SPARK ANTI-REGIME DEMONSTRATIONS OR VIOLENCE. (THIS MAY ACCOUNT FOR FACT THAT SYRIAN LOSSES WE HAVE HEARD ABOUT WERE DISPROPORTIONATELY LARGE FOR CHRISTIAN AND OTHER MINORITIES. IT MAY BE THAT ARMY TRIES TO MINIMIZE NUMBER OF SUNNI TROOPS SENT TO LEBANON). FOR THESE REASONS, MINIMIZING SYRIAN CASUALTIES WILL BE AN IMPORTANT CONSIDERATION IN ANY ACTION THE SYRIAN LEADERSHIP MAY DECIDE TO UNDERTAKE IN LEBANON.

PELLETREAU

NOTE BY OC/T: # AS RECEIVED.

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